



Community Forum on Faith

The Forum on Faith sponsored by the Little Rock Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission (www.littlerock.org/CityManager/Divisions/RacialAndCulturalDiversityCommission) and the Nehemiah Group (www.nehemiah-group.org) on August 14, 2007 at the Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas was the final forum of a three part series whose sole purpose was and is to provide a framework for better understanding ourselves in relation to racial, cultural and faith-based grids through which we all tend to view reality.

Thus, like the other forums, the forum on faith was not intended to specifically address the current issues facing the LRSD or to provide a setting for the promotion of related agendas. Rather, these forums consider how decisions can and should be made apart from contentious emotion. Thus, organizers hoped to provide a context for such understanding and tools for working alongside others in a variety of situations with whom we disagree. Ultimately, however, organizers hope their efforts will encourage the greater community of Little Rock to help resolve current points of contention in the best interest of young people and the city of Little Rock.

We hope as we prepare for the 50th anniversary of the integration of Little Rock Central High School this year that the courage to make a change is remembered and respected.

Forum on Faith Panel

Rev. Rickey Hicks, Rufus K. Young AME Church

Imam Johnny Hasan, The Islamic Center for Human Excellence

Dr. Harry Li, Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas

Rabbi Gene Levy, B'nai Israel

Moderators: Mayo Johnson, Chair of the Little Rock Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission and Mark DeYmaz of the Nehemiah Group.

Key Questions

1. What is faith?
2. What should we understand about faith that can help us in critical thinking, decision-making and conflict resolution?
3. How can we avoid cynicism, division and destructiveness built purely on cultural grids in order to promote civil discourse and social harmony?

Forum Summary

Based on panelist comments and exchanges with the audience, four major accomplishments of this forum as well as four recommendations are presented. Furthermore, audience feedback is summarized. We have also provided a list of references and suggested readings.

What were the major accomplishments of the forum on faith?

1. Mutual respect born in humility was affirmed as a requisite value for effective interfaith dialogue.

Faith is often seen as a source of divisiveness. However, for each panelist, faith is a source of humility that prompts respect for those who differ in worldviews and beliefs.

Rev. Hicks, of the AME church, presented a question he asks in his bible study classes, *If you were born in India, would you be a Hindu? Would you be a Buddhist? The question answers itself—of course you would.* In such a context, we are challenged to realize that few of us arrive at our faith positions based on some objective search for truth. Instead, the culture and family of our birth are the primary sources of our beliefs. This awareness should prompt a humility that encourages us to respect others as we seek to understand their faith and share our own.

Rabbi Gene Levy, B'nai Israel held the position that arguing faith creates problems. He provided a hypothetical historical context. Imagine in 1979 if we had both the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Moonies arguing faith. Both would claim each other was the devil. Those of other faiths would be on the sidelines saying, *No, they're both the devil.* Rabbi Levy went on to note that, *You can argue texts, you can argue history, but faith is way to personal to argue.* The personal or experiential element of faith, born in cultures and contexts we did not choose, suggests the need for dialogue rooted in humility, respecting both the other person and what we have to learn from each other.

Faith that nourishes a humility that prompts respect is tied directly to another idea presented by the panelists. Faith itself is a resource that can, should, and when enacted does create opportunities for constructive responses to conflict.

2. Faith was presented as a resource for responding to conflict.

Dr. Harry Li, Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas, stressed the role of faith in providing perspective. Dr. Li stressed that faith is about being uncomfortable, about getting out of one's comfort zone. In a particular, faith provides a resource for helping others manage their conflicts by providing two sorts of perspective, *height* and *length*.

Imagine a tense moment in any conflict. Faith can improve our conflict outcomes if we have the perspective of height. For instance, regardless of ideology, *are we on the same team, do we have the same goals and, if so, how do we work together?* The idea of height is parallel to a focus on questions that will help us see more than what we tend to focus on in the heat of the moment. Put differently, you or someone intervening in a conflicted relationship can ask: *What would effective communication look like in this setting? What would we have to say or not say to reach the goals that matter the most to us?*

The other type of perspective is *length* or a longer view of time. Faith in this context means reflecting on questions that take us beyond the moment by asked things like: *What are you here for, what are you here to do, does it extend beyond yourself and your time? What is the long-term effect?* Such questions can help get those who are diametrically opposed to compromise and come together, to move toward each other.

The notion of faith providing perspective was echoed in a story recounted by Rev. Hicks. On a recent trip to Africa, an elderly man shared a story about a remarkable incident on the African savannah. A fire had swept the grass land save one mount that had become a refuge. On that mount, animals normally in a predator-prey relationship became common seekers of safety and peace. In this story, the idea of seeing the big picture, of seeing our common humanity and plight, can help us find needed common ground with people of different faiths.

Imam Johnny Hasan also stressed faith as resource. In his faith tradition, Allah or God, charges man, his agent on this earth, to be about critical thinking. Faith then must include works and those works should be prompted by the critical thought that we should *Live as though you will die tomorrow; plan as though you will live forever.*

Faith as a resource was further stressed by Dr. Li when he quoted a text from the Bible: *So far as it depends upon you, be at peace with all men.* Dr. Li's comments on this text stressed the resource of faith as one that can help us to have constructive dialogue. He went on to say: *I can be at peace with the men sitting next to me (on this panel) and, even though we have fundamental differences, I can show them respect without violating my own conscience. I can have a polite conversation without denigrating their beliefs; I can respect them as men of compassion; even to the point where our adrenaline pumps and our passion is engaged, and at the end of it I can buy them a cup of coffee and ask about their families. We can work through differences in a way that does not lead to conflicts. Sometimes in the heat of the moment, our cultural upbringing may cause us to respond in a knee-jerk fashion; we have to remember that the process can be as important as the result.*

Faith a resource for managing conflict indicated the ways people of various faith traditions can learn to work together. The faith perspective also suggested approaches to addressing racism in our community.

3. Four different visions were presented as ways to reduce racism.

U.A.L.R.'s Chancellor Anderson asked a question that prompted four specific responses from the different panelists. *If you could get all the rabbis, pastors, imams, ministers, all of them to do one thing for racial cooperation during the fiftieth anniversary, what would you ask them to do?*

Each panelist suggested a different approach:

Rev. Hicks: We must attack social ills—our faith in God must lead us to a better position with each other. God instructs us to lift the downtrodden. It is not often talked about—you must understand that much of what is done at the grassroots is not often what is talked about in the Democrat-Gazette. So many of the best programs—anti-drug, literacy, and so on—are taking place in the churches and temples and mosques. There are many ecumenical activities going on all the time, but you don't hear about them.

Dr. Li: Encourage all the leaders to call on their members to reach out across their barriers, to know someone who is completely different from themselves. It's been our experience that once you get to know someone's heart, the outside doesn't matter.

Rev. Hicks: It has to be a continuous effort: We get together, we dialogue, and then we go home and life goes on. But—if all of us would get together, put in some money, and start a cultural diversity school, where all our children could come together, to study together, to play together, and to begin to develop a sense of diversity. Our racism really sets in with us—children don't see that, children just see another child to play with. I don't think we need a color-blind society—you'll see people's color—but the color of their skin should have no more impact than the color of their eyes or the color of their hair.

Rabbi Levy: I'd do two things with the clergy: We'd all go see "Hairspray", where it's not just a racial thing, but a physical thing, with this stocky girl who can't get a job dancing. Next, we'd all get together and we'd all bring our bibles, and we'd do Jim Wallis' experiment. He and some friends took every reference to poverty and cut it out, and saw that the size of the bible was reduced by one-third. That is the most important topic in the bible. If we got that through to the ministers, I think that all these other programs would come flowing from that.

Imam Hasan: Who should you respect the most? Your mother, then your mother, then your mother, then your mother, then your father. I'd ask everyone to free the women, who have lost all consciousness of family in a society which is materialistic and has given a freedom of choice without any consideration of value. It's a society in which women are seen as objects—men and women make these choices, not BET. Society has

now come to the point where women are objects and not subjects. I would ask our ministers to get together and liberate our women from these social ills, allowing their bodies to be used for profit.

4. Cultural integrated religious services were presented as an alternative to the norm of separation.

The idea of crossing faith and cultural boundaries was discussed. The limitations and promise of each were discussed with a challenge presented to consider greater integration, at least within a given faith tradition.

Rabbi Levy stressed that it is *okay to have our differences*. He went on to note that visiting a faith service different from your own was not likely to result in faith building experience given the different traditions and core beliefs. Thus, for example, for a Jew to come into a church and expect a faith experience, *that's just not going to happen*. Educational or esthetic experience, yes, but the very different messages would make faith experiences less meaningful than within one's own tradition. However, he did encourage the value of interfaith services such as those connected with the fiftieth anniversary. In this context, we don't expect a Muslim service or a Jewish service, but a service designed with agreed on purposes.

In the context of integrating religious services across cultural and racial boundaries, two ideas were held in tension or in contrast with each other. On one hand, the value of separation as opposed to segregation was stressed. For instance, one audience member commented that if on Sunday morning, I have a right to go to the AME church—that's separation, not segregation. *Under segregation, we had no choice. Under current circumstances, we have a choice.*

Rickey Hicks concurred with this idea when he referred to the statement frequently heard *that Sunday morning is the most segregated time in America*. He did not believe such separation was necessarily a bad thing. *People have different beliefs, and should be able to gather with people who share those beliefs*. He went on to note that *how we worship* does not have to keep us from working together to solve social problems. The reality is, according to Rev. Hicks that you will probably never see a day *when we are all going to be under one big roof all worshipping together*.

Imam Hasan shared a similar position when he stressed that what divides us is the way we assign value to beliefs and ethnicities. In this process various *isms* form with the idea that one group is better than another. He noted that if you look at our basic beliefs, *our consciousness is directed toward our creator* and *God gives us our differences so that we can become educated about each other*. Religion and nationalism become problems when we devalue one human being and accelerating the value of another.

In contrast to the acceptance of separation, Dr. Li suggested that there is a way to come together across racial and cultural boundaries. He provides the following as a brain-teaser

for their church members--- *The kingdom of God is not segregated so why on Earth is the church?*

Dr. Li went on to stress that integration it is not about becoming one big cultural *goo*. Instead, in the context of a multicultural church, the call is to *conform to the image of Christ*. In this way we retain our distinctiveness and our personalities, but we are transformed spiritually.

An audience member who served as a public school teacher questioned the value of separation. She noted that: *We can call it segregation or separation, but my middle school students don't see the difference—they've gone to an all-white or an all-black church, or a church like this, and when they've seen people in that context, they think people like themselves are the important people.*

This same audience member challenged people to reach out to people unlike themselves. How we get along socially—that has nothing to do with religion. She noted that students do perceive themselves in a forced *segregation*. *They see it as the way it ought to be—how their parents, their grandparent do things. That separation is forced on the students—what their parents do is forced, and that's taught to them.*

Rabbi Levy provided a counter point to the above statement. He noted agreement to a certain extent, but then stressed that church is one hour a week, while public school is forty hours a week. He went on to stress that he had been an ardent opponent of private schooling for that reason.

The audience member responded by noting *that if the most important time—if you've taught your children that religion and family come first, and they see religion as separated, voluntarily or not—then in the cafeteria they separate.*

Dr. Li concurred with this audience member by stating the value of integrating churches. He stressed that separation may be the most natural thing to do with about 97% churches operating that way. However, he noted that the *blessings* that come in a multicultural context are *supernatural*—there is something special that happens in that context.

Building on these four positive accomplishments, four areas merit attention in future faith forums aimed to improve civic discourse and social harmony.

1. Create forums that encourage discussion of differences as well as similarities.

Respect and humility were stressed as two primary values that aid in dialogue. Proponents of each faith must continually encourage these values in the context of interfaith dialogue and conversations. Religious texts of each major faith encourage such values and share other common ground as well. However, beyond common ground it is of value to encourage dialogue over differences.

A commonly practiced venue for dialogue is a focus on ways major faiths share similar teachings. Still, these same religions also make various contrasting and even competing truth claims that merit exploration. It is in the context of asserting one's own views while being open to the other that learning occurs. Thus, rather than viewing truth seeking or sharing as a source of division or something to be avoided, when humility and respect are present such dialogue can be enriching.

One participant indicated the need to not assume that peace was always possible in interfaith dialogue. He asked: *How can you and I seek peace when you and I believe different things? What if I hold to the faith that Christ live, was crucified, buried and raised from the dead, and you do not? Will my faith keep me from finding that peace that I need to have?*

Rev. Hicks responded that if your faith *keeps you from sitting down and being brothers and sisters with those who are different from you, then you need to sit down and look very carefully at your faith*. You might not agree with everyone, but you can live peacefully with them. For instance, if you are interested in education, you will sit down with people who have different beliefs.

Rev. Hick's response indicates that we can work together on common agendas, like education, despite differences and in that sense *be at peace* with each other. Yet, the idea of exploring difference goes further to include the idea that constructive dialogue can occur even on topics and areas we are not in agreement about, including faith views.

From both a faith perspective and a communication perspective, we come to know what we believe through such dialogue. For instance, one Biblical text exhorts sharing one's faith as way to more fully *know Christ*. The process of dialogue, of listening to another while being open to understanding their views, becomes a way to deepen our spiritual experience. Put differently, faith is also formed and matured in the process of dialogue with someone who holds differing views. Dialogue over differences in worldview and truth can be viewed as a process of encouraging growth in faith. Future forums should find ways to encourage such dialogue, however, a requisite of such include dialogue training.

2. Train leaders and community members on interfaith dialogue.

One audience member stated that they had been away from Little Rock for eight years and asked if there was anything that the faith community could actually celebrate? Has there been a coming together?

Dr. Li responded by noting that this effort was a part of that coming together and that progress had been made. A natural next step beyond these forums is to consider ways to work with other organizations (UALR, the Clinton School, etc) in encouraging formal public dialogue training. A list of resources has been provided with these three reports. Research and literature on dialogue captures a dialogic ideal--*to learn to both assert one's own truths and beliefs while be profoundly open to the other*. The questions become:

how can we train such practices? How can we move past panel forums to formats that encourage more interaction between citizens?

One central idea found in several dialogue training approaches is that of learning to look *at* communication rather than just *through* communication. To *look at communication* means paying attention to what we create in our dialogue, in the words we use and don't use, in the way we talk and the way we listen. In this mode we ask each other at the start of the dialogue: *What do we want to create with our communication? What does respect or humility look like when we share commonalities and differences?*

In contrast, looking only *through* communication tends to put a focus only on the content of faith or culture or race. Looking only *through* communication fails to account for what we create when we talk to each other. As our panelists stressed, we can learn to create meaningful relationships even as we experience tension over our tensions.

Such training responds to the audience member mentioned above who asked a challenging question. After Dr. Li had discussed the way Christians are called to be at peace with everyone, as much as it is possible, as stated above, this audience member asked: *How can you and I seek peace when you and I believe different things? Will my faith keep me from finding that peace that I need to have?*

This audience member captured a common misconception about dialogue. Dialogue is not about hiding our differences or avoiding conflicts over truth claims. Peace in the context of avoiding conflict is not peace, but a false harmony.

Faith leaders can and should model this process of sitting down and learning to listen and share across difference. Interfaith dialogue training in houses of worship as well as other institutions of learning would further equip citizens to gain a vision of the kinds of communities we can create with communication aimed at creating civic discourse

3. Future forums and dialogues need to be inclusive of polytheistic and atheist participants.

Two different audience members noticed the lack of inclusion of other major religious such as Buddhism, Hinduism, as well as atheistic worldviews. No doubt it would be difficult to have one forum with all faiths and worldviews present. Nonetheless, our panelist indicated ways we can encourage civic discourse even when differences in worldview range from theistic to polytheistic to atheistic.

For example, one participant noted that *we have all monotheistic faiths represented on the panel*. Is there a way to have a conversation about faith without excluding those who don't have that monotheistic set of beliefs? In a similar vein another participant indicated that as someone who did not believe in God, he wondered if there was a place for him?

In response to this concern, Rev. Hicks stated that our common ground is a need to address social ills. *There is our common ground, and you too play a role there as well. That is one of the most beautiful things about America that no one has to believe any particular thing.*

Rev. Hicks' comments make it clear that the question is *on what basis can we come together*" In this country, we can and must continue to unite on our freedom of religion and our common desire to create communities that are just and fair. Thus, the question we must ask is: *What type of communication should characterize such civic discourse across an even wider array of faiths and worldviews?* Beyond our common USA values, communication that seeks to both assert one's own beliefs while listening and remaining open to learning from the other must be at the heart of such a process.

4. Create venues to explore the value and challenges of multicultural houses of worship and faith communities.

As noted above, a major element of this forum surfaced differing ideas about the practicality and value of encouraging multicultural faith groups. In the context of reflecting on such integration, the following types of questions should be explored:

- *What is lost if I no longer focus just on worship venues and messages from my cultural heritage?*
- *Certain cultural values will likely dominate, how is that going to be decided?*
- *What is the real value of such an effort given the challenges?*

A statement mentioned at the forum and reported earlier in this report provides a historic context and a place to launch an exploration of the multicultural faith community option. Martin Luther King Jr. was paraphrased in reference to Sunday as the *most segregated hour* in this country. Mark DeYmaz of the Mosaic Church provided a historic context for this statement. Based on his research, this statement did not originate with Dr. King or with Rev. Billy Graham, but originated in the late 1800's during reconstruction.

The historic roots of this statement provides one place to begin a forum on multicultural places of worship. In this exploration, we could tap into historic resources developed in this country to respond to reconstruction and the political and social divisiveness of those years. In particular, *the pragmatists*, emerged as a group seeking to provide practical guidance to improve civic discourse.

As one audience member noted, most of our children do not experience choice when their only exposure is culturally segregated houses of worship. Yet, much remains to be learned about how to bridge cultures when culture and language are so closed connected with how we experience our faith. Thus, venues or forums that explore this concept further would be of value.

Evaluation Form Feedback

Partners

Philander Smith College
University of Arkansas Clinton School of Public Service
Mosaic Church of Central Arkansas

Information

Please contact Carlette Henderson, Executive Director of the Little Rock Racial and Cultural Diversity Commission at 501-244-5483 with questions about this report or you may contact the primary author of these forum reports, Dr. Gerald Driskill, University of Arkansas at Little Rock, 501-569-3158.